12/29/68

No Room December 27, 1964 Luke1:67-2:7

In all of literature there is no more tender ~~and~~ her heart warming story than the Biblical account of the Christ Child's birth. All the elements of a touching drama are present: the weary family looking for a place suitable for the birth of their child: the crowded city, full of boistrous travelers: the lonely stable, dark, quiet, except for the nocturnal noises of ~~the~~ sleeping animals: the shepherds, rough humble men, coming to see the new born: and the dignity and mystery of the Magi, bringing precious gifts of Gold Francincence and Myhrr. There's something here for everyone. Only an outright cynic would not find himself moved deeply by this immensly appealing story.

And moved everyone is! A few years ago someone started a campaign to put Christ back into Christmas. It was a successful venture. Baby Jesus was good for ~~Religious cards far outnumber the secular type.~~ business Manger scenes, a rare treat in my childhood, now adorn every store counter ~~window.~~ I'm not sure about Christ, but the birth of a child has been put back into Christmas, and the whole world celebrates. - + it's a smashing success

Each year, a few weeks before Christmas, someone feels called to announce to the world that the Biblical story of Jesus' birth is not literally true. ~~Several years Last year it was a Dutch theologian, this year it was a Jesuit Priest from Chicago.~~ No doubt you've heard the logic: the star, a convergence of two planets, occurred in 6 BC: there is nothing said about three wisemen in the Bible: one account tell s of a trip to Egypt: the other omits it, and so. The latest (*) comes from a Jesuit Priest who believes that the "No room in the Inn" story couldn't be true, because the near Easterners were overbearingly hospitable. I get a little weary of this sort of thing, mainly because I assume that most intelligent Christians don't view the Bible as a Huntley-Brinkley Report. Perhaps the story is exagegrrated: perhaps it has been altered and amended. We are concerned with the truth of the accounts: but ~~we are not particulary concerned about~~ Our concern is not particular the vehicle the writer chose to express that truth. We are concerned with the historicity of the record: not with minute detail, some of which is certainly not accurate to the number and minute, but with the historical reality that at a certain time, and at a certain place, God did invade the realm of human existence in the birth of jesus of Nazareth.

While we do not hinge our faith on the literary details that adorn the accounts, we do read and study them carefully, to discover their intent, and to hear, through the total witness, God's word to us. — and —

For me there has always been an eloquent word contained in the little detail about no room in the Inn. Even though the Chicago Jesuit feels that it detracts from the Christmas Message, I want to suggest that it is a necessary and profound anecdote to that message. It is to that anecdote that I now want to direct your attention, keeping in mind my introductory idea that the world has put the birth of a baby back into Christmas, that the world pauses to celebrate that birth, but that the identity of the child is not particularly important, and subsequently, that there is no room for Jesus Christ, the man.

The Gospel according to Luke states simply that Mary gave birth to her first born son and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. It was a busy time, Behtlehem was choked with travelers on their way back to their place of origin to be counted in the census. Mary and Jospeh encountered the hazahrd of all late travelers: "No vacancy" The inn keeper was not necessarily a gruff, inhospitable man. It was just that the others had arrived first, he had no meore room in his inn. To him they were no different from anyone else: he had no way of knowing that the child to be born was God incarnate.

~~This is the story then, Jesus was born in a stable, becaus the inn was full, and because the innkeeper simply didn't know who he was.~~ There's a prophetic note about this anecdote: an eternal truth about the way men have always dealt with Jesus Christ. Menare still ignoring Jesus Christ becaus e they have no room for him: the only difference is that men today have received the baby; men have celebrated his birth: the baby has been put back into our year-end festival.

Much is said about the Post Christmas let-down. I suppose I experience this as much as anyone. All our decorations and lavish trimmings seem to lose their joyous luster the day after Christmas. We spend so much time and effort preparing for the day itself, that we find ourselves physically and emotionally exhausted ~~the day after~~ as soon as it's over.

But -

In a sense today is the most important Sunday of the year, while we are languishing in the let down. We have celebrated the birht of Jesus Christ- and now we are left with the vast implicatoons of that birth. We have celebrated something that is very easy to celebra a tender and moving birth story: but now we are left with the man. If our celebration was authentic; if our Christmas spirit had a deeper origin than chestnuts over an open fire and children's faces all aglow, we will go on celebrating. The joy of Christmas day will spill over into every day: the angel's pronouncment will fill us with thanksgiving ~~everyday of the year~~ throughout the year, and the man Jesus Christ will continually confront us, seeking room in our lives. The world that celebrated so enthusiastically falls far short here. The natigity scenes are packaged and stored till next year. The good will that filled the air for a few brief weeks is likewise put on the shelf. And he whose birth is behind it all is conveniently forgotten for another 11 months. The door, opened a crack, durong the holidays, is securely fastened. There is simply no room.

The Bombs are falling on Viet Nam

~~We do well, on this Sunday after Christmas, to examine our Faith, remembering Luke's anecdote to the birth story to see if we fall into that category, and to discover wether our Christmas joy motivates us to hold up the man Jesus Christ, before the world, throughout the years.~~

The inn keeper refused the Christ child entrance because he had no room: there was no space available. Epicopalian Bishop, James Pike, in his latest book, ("A Time For Christian Candor") concludes that this is still the biggest problem facing the Church of Jesus Christ today. He points out that the authentic atheist is extremelyr rare: even an honest agnostic is hard to come by these days. But the world is filled with the indifferent: ~~those who have no~~ room in their lives: those, in his words, ("Whose diffedence is about like that of most people towrd vegetarianism: its nothing they've ever been involved in or particularly thought about.")

This is the type of person who would say: ("Maybe some people need religion: I'm glad for them to have it.") As for me, I don't need it, and I'm not interested in it. My life is full enough with the things I am interested in: my work, my chosen form of

recreation, my circle of friends. In my life there is no necessity for religious belief."

Now let's not deceive ourselves by thinking that we are dealing with an isolated view of a small group in society. On the contrary, the majority of people ~~are not activie y involved in the church~~, hold such a postion or a variation of it. ~~And to go a step further, there are many~~ many of them ~~like mine~~, in the church. No opponents of Christianity, not atheists, actually very congenial people who smile benevolently at the Christ Child, but who couldn't care less about the man Jesus Christ.

And yet everyman has a God, or gods. Everyman believes something, and believing is having a religion, even if the nature of that belief is that there is no God. Within the structure of the human psyche is the capacity and need to trust something, to believe in something. A noted theologian has pointed out that ~~PARADIAD~~: "Belief is applicable to the trust we have that the storekeeper will return our change: religion starts ona somewhat more cosmic level." Every man has certain basic assumptions on which he operates and orders his daily living. In a scale of priority, those assumptions that are basic, first on the list, constitute a man's religion.

and everything else

Actually, it is very easy, within this context, to have "relgion" without Jesus Christ. Certainly it is easier without him, than with him. ~~It is even possible to be a monotheist of sorts, a believer in one God, without Jesus Christ.~~ For some people, religion is based on simple selfishness ~~the one God is a diety commonly called Mammon~~. To every situation this person responds by asking: "What's in it for me?, what am I going to get out of it?" Everything from the policies of the federal govenment to the choice of friends is judged by the benefit the person himself will receive.

Others put their trust in a political theory or system. Fascism thrives on absolute trust in the state and the leader. Communism seeks men's minds and hearts and demands subservience of self to the cause. ~~This is why most political theorists agree that it is organized religion, and not another political theory, that is the ultimate opponent of Communism. For both~~ Christianity, Facism and Communism demand the same things: commitment, discipleship, sacrifice, absolute trust. And a man can give all of this only once. ~~In any case, some people make a religion out of a political or social ideology.~~

Fianlly there ~~a~~ is a very subtle form of mammon that inflicts us all to some degree. It is called self-deification. When all the barriers are lowered, when we are absolutely honest with ourselves, we find that we trust ultimately in ourselves. We like the feeling of self sufficiency and individuality. We like to think that there is nothing ~~a~~ we cannot attain if we bring all our resources to bear on it. We like to feel that we are the absolute masters of our destiny and that the universe revolves around us.

And then there are the Polytheists., those who spread their trust and belief thinly among a number of deities: financial security, status, vocation, service club or lodge, and in the rush of worshippingat the altars of many gods, the person feels torn and fragmented in a schizoid way. Certainly for him there is no room. He can squeeze the birth of a child into the already overcrowded docket: but one man can beleive ultimately in only so much.

Lack of space was not the only reason the innkeeper turned Mary and Josepf away. There was the matter of not knowing who they weree, and the identity of the child about to be born. We can hardly criticize him for this: he had no way of knowing. ~~But we cannot rely on this excuse.~~

I would suggest that the person today who celebrates the birth of a baby but has no room in his life for Jesus Christ, ~~is in this position because he has either~~ may have never heard who he was and is, but it is more probable that he has just ~~or else he has~~ never taken seriously the specific and ~~the~~ claims the church makes about this child

It's almost astonishing to discover that many adults think of Jesus Christ in amanner totally aprt form what the church and Bible teach. He has been ~~called~~ called a good and righteous man: he has been called a great moral teacheer: he is known as the friend of the poor and sick: his life is used by countless persons and groups as an illustration of a life to emulate. But rarely, outside of thepulpit, does one hear him called God incarnate: rarely do we hear him referred to as the giver of new life: ~~a bringer of the kingdom of God on earth~~ reconciler of men & society. Iv'e always wondered how it is possible to know what the church is claiming about Jesus Christ, and what he claimed about himself, and then to remain indifferent. Iv'e always wondered how it is possible to celebrate his birth, or even feel good about it, and then forget him .

For, either the claim that he is God incarnate is absolutleu true, or else it is a pure hoax. If it is true, if Almighty God did take on flesh and live among men, then those who know it and believe it to be true must put ~~there~~ their complete trust and commitment here and nowhere else. And if it is not true: if the Biblcal claims are the result of man's imagnation, then the whole thing, Church, Faith, Christmas story, ought to be strenuously opposed and ultimatel y destroyed as the cruelest and most fantastic lie ever told.

There is no middle ground, ~~when we are honest~~: there is no room for indifference or apathy, for when we hear the claims made about this new born child we must either accept him as our Lord, or dismiss him as a fraud.

Having just celbreted his birth, we need to consider these things. We need to see that the Christmas message is one of Joy and gladness, ~~but that it is only the first~~ not only because a child was born but because Jesus Christ, the man, step of a long journey. ~~We need to realize that Jesus Christ~~ came into the world, ~~not only as a baby, but as a man who lived and died as God incarnate.~~ to live for us and die for us - as God incarnate

Let us celebrate his coming, not only in the traditional, yearly customs of Christmas which soon will be gone, but by renewing our trust and faith in him, by commiting ourselves to follow him whereever he might lead: by seeing that there is room in our lives, not only for the Baby of Bathelhem, but also for the Lord ~~Jesus~~ Christ.

Eternal God
~~Our Father~~, we thank thee for the good + beautiful tradition of this joyous season - for the hope + joy + affection. Keep us, our Father, from shallow celebration. Give us eyes of faith - to see reflected in the manger - the great love of the cross. Thru J.C. our Lord. Amen